

# The International Dalit Solidarity Network

*"Working globally against discrimination by work and descent"*

## **The Osu Caste System in Igboland Discrimination Based on Descent**

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## **Introduction**

The Igbos are found mostly in the Southeastern and South-central Nigeria called Igboland or Igbo society (Alaigbo or Anaigbo). By the late 20th century the population of the Igbos are about 27 million.<sup>1</sup> The majority of the Igbos are Christians, but some of them practice the indigenous traditional religion, whose major tenets are shared by all Igbo-speaking people of Nigeria (Uchendu 1965). The traditional religion is passed on to succeeding generations, but the advent of Christianity in Igboland around “1885” had some influence on the traditional beliefs (Talbot 1969). The indigenous traditionalists believe in the earth goddess, deities and ancestral spirits and in a Creator-God, Chukwu, Obasi, Chi, or Chineke, the “Supreme God” (Achebe 1959). The Igbo traditional beliefs have some positive influence on the culture and social lives of the people. For instance, the forefathers of the Igbos were known for their righteousness, honesty and hard work. And they were opinion leaders, impartial judges and people of impeccable character.

However, a relic of the indigenous religious practice of the Igbos is the dehumanizing Osu caste system, which has divided and alienated the Igbos.

Therefore, this paper discusses the Osu caste system, an indigenous religious belief system, practiced within the Igbo nation, with the purpose of bringing the discriminatory, dehumanizing and obnoxious Osu caste system to the attention of the international community. This is because whenever issues of discriminatory practices around the world are tabled for discussion in the international community the repugnant and discriminatory Osu caste system is never mentioned.

## **Definitions of Terms**

It is essential to provide some definitions and clarifications of terms associated with the Osu caste system. It would be very difficult, if not impossible to explain and analyze the terms related to the issue to individuals who are not familiar with the system without an explanation of the many labels describing the Osu. Each ethnic nationality in Nigeria has its own reasons for discriminating against their own people; and some of the reasons are apparently religious.

The Igbos, which are the center of this discourse, discriminate against each other by reason of the Osu caste status. The Igbo people refer to the Osu in varied names; it is referred to as Adu-Ebo in Nzam in Onitsha. In the Nsukka area it is referred to as Oruma; it is called Nwani or Ohualusi at Augwu area.<sup>2</sup> These names, Osu, Ume, Ohu, Oru, Ohu Ume, Omoni (Okpu-Aja), have the same connotation in Igboland. The people referred to by the names are regarded as sub-human being, the unclean class, or slaves.

In this paper the author shall use the term, Osu, to describe all the lower caste groups in Igboland. It should be noted that in their hierarchy of social status, the Ume (especially, in this author’s community) is the Osu class the Diala abhors to interact or socialize with the most.

The Osu, by definition, is a people sacrificed to the gods in Igbo community. And they assist the high priest of the traditional religion to serve the deities or the gods in their shrine. It is the belief of many Igbo traditionalists that the deities, which were (and are still) perceived in some quarters as being very powerful, would wreck havoc in the society, if they are not appeased. In some special circumstances, those who hold the traditional beliefs of the Igbos could transform a Diala who committed certain atrocities against the land, into an Osu. This process involved intricate rituals (offering of libations

and sacrificing animals to the earth goddess). Some of the ancestors of the present-day Osu people inherited their dehumanizing social status this way. That method is now a thing of the old; Western influence has affected this practice. Presently, one could acquire the Osu status through inheritance and marriage.

Because of many oral interpretations of the construct, the Osu has various definitions. It has been defined as a 'cult slave,' a living sacrifice,' an 'untouchable,' 'outcast,' 'owner's cult,' 'a slave of the deity,' and a 'sacred and holy being.'<sup>3</sup> These names mean the same: it is an abomination in the Igbo society for the Diala to marry Osu.

For this author, the Osu caste system is a societal institution borne out of a primitive traditional belief system colored by superstition, and propagated by ignorance. It is absurd to categorize a human as a sub-human being. Although this author is not a member of the group, he condemns the practice of the Osu caste system, because it is a human rights aberration.

The Osu caste system, which is a form of discrimination, has caused inter-communal discords and wars between the Osu and the Diala in Igboland. And many lives and properties have been destroyed as a result.

According to the United Nations definition, 'discrimination includes any conduct based on a distinction made on grounds of natural or social categories, which have no relation either to individual capacities or merits, or to the concrete behavior of the individual person.' The discriminatory Osu practices involves inequality in freedom of movement and choice of residence, inequality in the right of peaceful association, inequality in the enjoyment of the right to marry and establish a family, (and) inequality in access to public office... slavery' (Allport 1979, p. 52). That is the crux of the matter with the Osu caste system in Igboland. If one may ask, could a right exist if it is not regularly enforced? To put it differently, can a right exist without specific legislation that provides for its protection and remedies if violated? Oddly enough, the victims of the Osu system have not any legal recourse in Igboland. And strangely, some people believe that the humiliating Osu caste system is a part of the Igbo culture nobody should temper with. Fortunately, many Igbos have a contrary opinion.

### **The Osu Caste System and the Indigenous Religious Practices of the Igbo nation**

All human beings are created equal, but human experiences are heterogeneous. Some people have had it rough all their life on earth, while others do not have a lot to complain about. Naturally, life has the same meaning for everyone, but the Osu caste system in Igboland seems to have changed the meaning of life for a group of people branded Osu. No historical question gives the Igbos more concern than that of, "How did the Osu caste system come to be in Igboland?" This section of the paper attempts to deal with the question.

There are many versions of oral information on the origins of the Osu caste system. In the absence of documented information, oral sources are central to the study of history in Igboland, and other parts of Nigeria. There is a paucity of written information on the issue of the Osu caste system. This is apparently because many people shy away from discussing the issue for fear of being branded Osu lovers. However, available little documented information show that the Osu caste system started out of the indigenous religious practices of the Igbos.

The indigenous religion is interwoven with Igbo cultural practices, and it is difficult for foreigners to fully understand and appreciate the good part of the Igbo culture. The indigenous Igbo regards himself as a meeting point of Mother Earth or "Ala", which contains all physical creation and the ancestral spirit that is functionally linked to his ancestors. The Supreme Spirit "Chi-Ukwu" or "Chukwu" is the force of creation and the

custodian of infinite power over everything. The Igbo man relates to this infinitely powerful God image through the deities that are ultimately linked to one's "chi" or spiritual force. Deities are derived out of objects of creation such as 'geophysical landmarks' like seas, lakes, rivers, streams, caves, hills and mountains, spirits such as warrior-kings and legendary spiritual leaders. Those geophysical landmarks are regarded as the homes of the gods and the ancestral spirits (Isiechi 1976). And the gods are perceived as the bridges between the people and their life. And the belief was that these gods could be manipulated in order to protect them and serve their interest.<sup>4</sup> An individual's fortunes are determined by the byproduct of interactions that exist between one's "chi", the deities and the Creator or "Chineke". Humans interact directly with deities, which function as intermediaries to the Supreme Spirit or Creator. Being in good terms with powerful deities in one's domain is an assurance that one is likely to obtain the largesse of creation while, at same time, minimize the wrath of the forces of nature. It is an individual's obligation to observe the customs of the land since their violation could offend the deities; and goodwill and protection from the deities depends on one's cordial relationship with them.

Every indigenous Igbo community maintained a shrine where the family's ancestral spirits resided and communed with the living. There were (are still) village and town deities, which became more powerful because of their reputation or notoriety. This category of deities is almost like institutions unto themselves. The deities were (and some are still) attended to by highly respected priests and assistants, who were (are) engaged in serving the spiritual needs of visitors who could come from far away places to commune at the famous shrines.

Historical accounts have it that, about 6 centuries ago, the growth in number of powerful deities created the need for many assistants for the high priests of major shrines.

Miniature 'monasteries' were established in the vicinity of major shrines to train and maintain a constant supply of high-priest assistants. And because some of these deities are believed to be very powerful, they should be attended to on continuous basis, with intricate religious rituals in their shrines. However, the "indigenous monks," upon mastering their spiritual functions (of learning to serve the gods) were unjustly and erroneously assigned the Igbo pejorative name of Osu, Ume or Ohu arusi (the slave of the deities/gods or shrines). And so was the story of how the institution of the Osu cult (ritual slavery) originated. The Osus and their descendants belonged to the gods; and they become the properties of the shrines. And they resided in the vicinity of the shrines of major deities and for all practical purposes excluded themselves from routine engagements with the rest of the community. In other words, being the agents of the deities the Osus maintained an aloof relationship with the rest of the civil society.

The early Osu ranks were "non-celibate" and thus had families; and the offspring inherited their status. The community maintained a set of rules that regulated their interactions with the Osus, mostly out of fear (and or respect) for the powerful deities under which they thrived and performed their religious functions. For instance, intimate social interaction, including marriage, was forbidden between Osus and the Diala. In some communities, it is forbidden for the Diala to spill the blood of Osus (even in non-hostile situations). Some communities go as far as forbidding the Diala from eating meat that was butchered or prepared by an Osu. The list of items that maintain a social divide between the Osus and the Diala grew and till today, but they vary from place to place. Any person who breaches the rules regulating their interaction with the Osu automatically becomes an Osu. Even though the offenders may not physically relocate to cohabit with the Osus, they were (are) regarded and treated like an Osu by the rest of the community. Like the racism, Osuism<sup>5</sup> have distorts and impedes normal interpersonal relationship between the Diala and Osu in Igboland.

Before the arrival of the 'white man' and Christianity, the discriminatory relationship that existed between Osus and Diala was perceived as normal. Things are gradually changing; the world is beginning to perceive the Osu caste system as a form of discrimination. However, the Osus fulfilled their lives in the communities by serving the deities. In return, they obtained a reasonable livelihood from proceeds of offerings that pour steadily into the premises of the deities that they served. The coming of the Europeans led to a process of social change and some of the customs of the indigenous Igbo society were beginning to be seen as going contrary to the beliefs of the Europeans. In the past, the tradition of some of the Igbo states, such as Ossomari and Arondizuogu, engaged in communal wars with the intention of procuring captives and slaves. Communities tended to punish their criminals by selling them into slavery. In some cases, parents were forced by "poverty and hunger" to sell their never-do-well children. During this stone-aged era human sacrifice was common, and slaves were often used for this purpose. According to Isiechi (1976), the dead rulers of Igbo Ukwu were buried together with several slaves as sacrifices.

However, the trans-Atlantic slave trade contributed to the frequency of inter-clan wars, which often resulted in neighboring communities raiding each other for slaves and other booties. The Osus were forbidden to be combatants in warfare for fear of spilling their blood, which could unleash the wrath of the deities. Some defenseless small communities were often compelled to seek refuge in the premises of nearby shrines in order to avert impending doom when under sudden attack from superior invading forces. Once the deity's high priest acknowledged and granted them protection from attack and harm to the refugees, they were automatically converted to the Osu status. In some circumstances, prisoners captured during inter-communal wars were sold off, and their new owners could elect to enlist some of them to Osu status by giving them away as gestures of and placation to a local deity. Other captives could be sold as slaves or become objects of ritual murder, which occurred mostly upon the death of powerful chieftains. However, some war captives preferred the Osu status rather than being sold far away to distant lands as slaves. Thus, the population of the Osu increased. Evidence suggests that the Osu were originally regarded with "respect and honour" apparently because they belonged to the gods. This show of respect for those who attended to the shrines, unfortunately, transformed into social ostracism. 6 And the Osus were not many in number. But in the nineteenth century, "their numbers expanded and their status deteriorated dramatically, so that they became outcasts, feared and despised" or even abhorred (Basden 1966).

With the abolition of slave trade in the nineteenth century (1807) the loss of external outlets for the sale of slaves led to an unprecedented escalation of the practice of using human beings for sacrifice. It was reported that forty slaves were killed and used for sacrifice at the death of Obi Ossai of Aboh, in 1845 (Isiechi 1976). As mentioned earlier, there is a strong Igbo belief that the spirits of one's ancestors keep a constant vigil over him/her. And traditional religion was highly practiced by the traditionalists; thus, the spirits of the all-important ancestors were worshipped through the gods or deities. In addition, the cessation of trans-Atlantic slave trade (and the inculcation of new values from the Europeans), the respect accorded to the Osu (because of their role as servants of powerful deities) began to wane. As noted earlier, the European missionaries began to perceive the ways of the indigenous religious practices as impediments to their mission of spreading the Christian faith. Thus, assault on the Igbo indigenous religious practices was fierce and multi-faceted. Children were effectively indoctrinated in the emerging school system to reject their parents' traditional way of life, which was characterized as both primitive and barbaric. The children in schools were used effectively as conduits for transforming the rest of the family.

In most cases, parents opted to join their children by converting to Christianity in order to avert major internal family crises. Where such was not the case, the aging parents were simply allowed to die away with their indigenous religious and cultural belief system. The converts to the new faith were used by early missionaries as effective tools for the destruction of cultural artifacts and religious objects like shrines, traditional sculptures and a host of other valuable indigenous artwork. Test of the new converts' faith in Christianity was usually their ability to destroy any relics of the past within their reach. But the whole of Igbo culture did not lie only in its artistic, cultural and religious artifacts. In spite of all the destruction, the average Igbo person retained the core values of his cultural heritage. Many people became churchgoers on Sundays, but remained loyal to the indigenous culture.

The interest of the British in Nigeria was purely economic; and this took precedence over everything else. The Osu caste system, a dynamic offshoot of Igbo indigenous religious practice, remains alive today as the British and their converts could not obliterate the belief system. And as those entrapped in the caste system could not be helped by system of their new Christian faith, they became disillusioned.

One of the factors that enabled early Christian missionaries to establish a foothold quickly in the Igbo heartland was their promise to new converts (mostly the Osus) that the new order would guarantee equality of rights and opportunities to everyone. But disillusionment (as earlier noted), soon dampened their enthusiasm when it gradually became clear that even the "whiteman's church" was not powerful enough to stop the discriminatory treatment meted out to them. The Osus, at the time in review, were known to have pursued Western education in large numbers. In addition, many joined the new Christian mission as priests and teachers. In spite of these accomplishments, the Osus' right to equal treatment remained unfulfilled, because neither the Christian missionaries nor the sketchy colonial administration in place had what it took to change the attitude of the people at the grassroots level where the Osu practice predominates. Presently, the Osus are like refugees who have been abandoned to wonder in the wilderness after being dislodged from their comfortable places as the servers of the deities. The respect and dignity that the Osus experienced because of their role within the indigenous religion has now been replaced with a de facto social ostracism from which escape is extremely difficult.

Another story has a different version of how the Osu system came to be in Igboland community. The story had it that an old man told some children who were gathered with him around a camp fire during a cold harmattan morning how a group of traditional elders ganged up to give up one of their own to the gods of the land. (The harmattan is a cold and dry wind blowing down from the north). The storyteller reported that his father told him that there was an agreement among the persons that were gathered for a ritual that one person from the village would be sacrificed to the gods, which would be made to appease the gods of the land that were terrorizing the community. Everyone at the meeting swore in the name of the gods and on the ofor (the ofor is the bible for those who hold traditional Igbo beliefs) that nobody would disagree with their decisions. The powerful gods would be made happy so that they would desist from wrecking havoc on the community. The man who was later chosen to attend to the shrines did not know that he was the person that would be selected to perform the task of serving the gods. When the man who was a party to the decision was unanimously selected (to be offered in sacrifice to the deities), he jumped up from his chair and cried, as he knew what his social status would be in the community. After a series of intense rituals were undertaken, the man was transformed and labeled an Osu of the land. And his descendants have since inherited his status. The community had to build a hut for him at a market square of the town, as the gods are usually located near a market place in

many communities in Igboland.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Osu system finds rationalization in Igbo religious beliefs and dogma.

Each time these stories are recounted, it would be easy for any rational person to figure out that they are colored by misconception. It is the opinion of this author that the Osu caste system, which has caused a lot misery to many people in Igboland, originated out of ancient beliefs. All these stories about the Osu caste system precede the Chinua Achebe's popular *Things Fall Apart*, in which the plights of the Osu or outcast in Igboland were vividly, described (1959, pp.154-156).

No matter how the Osu caste system originated in Igboland, and no matter its apparent past benefits, it is now the feeling of many peace-loving individuals that the ancient institution, which is an internal apartheid in Igboland, has outlived its usefulness. To redeem the Osus and Igbo society (which practice the obnoxious Osu caste system) one should revisit the past so as to explain the rationale behind the once vibrant Osu caste culture. The Osu caste system remains a sad reminder of the historical past of the Igbo nation. The only way to put those sad memories to rest is to find the ways and means to terminate the discriminatory practices of the Osu caste system as it exists today. And with the co-operation of everyone in the Igbo nation, this task can be accomplished.

### **Internal Apartheid**

Many other forms of discriminatory practices abound in Nigeria, but the Osu caste system is the main focus here. In the Southeast of Nigeria, the people of Umuode in Nkanu East local government area of Enugu State, who are said to be the descendants of the Osu, are being treated as second class citizens. In their Oruku community made up of Umuode, Umuchiani and Onuogowu, the people of Umuode have limited social interaction with the rest of the community because of their ascribed Osu status. And strangely, the other two villages cannot intermarry with the people of Umuode. No matter their social status in the community the local churches could hardly appoint the people of Umuode to positions of responsibility. Thus, the people are made outcasts. This class ostracism is operated in such a manner that any person from the other side of the community who talks to, or greets any person from Umuode, pays a fine sometimes as high as one Thousand Naira (N1,000). Because of this situation the people of Umuode operate their own local market different from the Eke-oruku market, which is owned exclusively by Umuchiani and Onuogowo. The people of Umuode have waged wars against this social stigma; about five major conflicts have been recorded in this area since 1995, and many lives have been lost (Agbaegbu, 12 Jan. 2000).

The people of Umuaka community in Imo State, Nigeria, categorize one of their ten villages Osu. Other minor lower caste groups found in many kindred are given the pejorative Igbo expression of 'ndi ejiri goro ihe,' meaning those who are sacrificial lamb to the gods. They are slaves to the gods of the community and kindred. As is the case in Umuode in Oruku community, the discrimination of the Diala against the Osu in Umuaka affects marriage and relationships of love with the Osu and the rest of the community. The Diala is traditionally and socially abhorred and forbidden to marry an Osu; intermarriage with Osu is an abomination.

However, some communities, for example, Nnobi in Idemili local government area of Anambra State, have been able to fully integrate their Osu population into the mainstream of the community. <sup>8</sup> All other Igbo communities should emulate the good work of the Nnobi community and work harder to bridge the Osu divide in their areas. In Umuaka the Osus who are interested in politics in the community are not getting the necessary support from the rest of the community. This has greatly hindered their social

upward mobility in the community. In the past the avid supporters of the Osu caste system would even refrain from eating (dinning) with them or drink from the same water-well (pond) with the Osu.

As noted earlier, this type of behavior could be likened to the issues during the civil right struggles in the United States when the 'whites' and 'blacks' were prevented from drinking from the same public fountain (Smelser 1981). In the past when the Osu discriminatory behavior was taken to the extreme, those who believed in the system would even refrain from touching the Osu for fear of being transformed into an Osu. In addition, in the past the ardent supporters of the Osu caste system would not buy whatever the Osu merchants had for sell in the local market. During that period in review, there was an apparent superstition that the ghost of the ancestors would haunt any person who was friendly with the Osu. There has been some slight improvement in social interaction between the Diala and the Osu, although inter-marriage between the two is still seen as a social taboo by the Diala.

In the late 1980s, the Osu people in Umuaka revolted, as they could not take the humiliation from the Diala any more. They physically assaulted a couple of women from the Diala section of the community, with the intention of transforming the women to Osu so that the Diala would reject them. The action would also give them the taste of the pains and humiliation of the Osu status. The brouhaha that followed this action was short-lived, as the Diala in the community responded with counter forces. In Imo State alone over 60 of such incidents have been reported since 1979 (see Ezeala & the Association for Social Justice (not dated); and Agbaegbu, 12 January 2000).

The Osu social problem cannot be solved by temporarily subduing those groups that are suffering from injustices with force. This author is not advocating violence, but the riots, which occurred in Umuaka in the late 1980s, and those of Umuode in the 1990s, are cautionary tales of what might happen to some of the Igbo communities if the plights of the Osu are not resolved. The insensitivity of the generality of the Igbos to the plights of the Osu has the potential to cause social violence in Igboland. And according to psychology, frustration can breed aggression. This author would like to add that hatred and discrimination breed frustration, which in turn breeds hatred and aggression. As Philosopher Spinoza rightly and nicely noted, "He who conceives himself hated by another, and believes that he had given him no cause for hatred, will hate that other in return" (Allport 1979, p.155).

The Igbos should begin to treat the "Osus" as the human beings that they really are. Any person who thinks they deserve the ugly social conditions they found themselves in should walk in their shoes (or switch lives with them) to feel their pains. While the world may not know everything about why and how conflicts occur in societies, several studies show that inequality, abuse of human and civil rights, absence of the rule of law, discrimination and absence of freedom are among the major causes of conflicts (and even civil wars). The United Nations' documents on social unrest in African societies point to these factors.<sup>9</sup>

Although some of the behaviors against the Osu are caused by the traditional belief system of the Igbos, this author would say that many of the supporters of the Osu caste practice are deficient in the skills needed to analyze the socio-economic and political development of the Igbo nations. If not, they should have known that such behaviors toward the so-called Osu affects the image of, and are detrimental to their welfare and the progress of the hardworking and peace loving Igbo society at large. It is criminal to violate people's civil and human rights under the excuse of preserving an ancient culture. As it were, "An injustice unresolved...burns a hole in the heart" (Cose, April 21, 1997, p.45).



## **The Osu caste system and stereotype**

It has been noted in the preceding sections that the Diala interact less with or avoids the Osu completely. In some communities in Igboland an Osu is regarded as a worthless human being. As *Things Fall Apart* notes in a conversation, which ensued over the question of admitting outcasts to a local little church in the village of Mbanta, between Mr. Kiaga, a missionary teacher, and one of the converts, the Osu is:

a person dedicated to a god, a thing set apart – a taboo forever, and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the freeborn. He was in fact an outcast, living in a special area of the village, close to the Great Shrine. Wherever he went he carried with him the mark of his forbidden caste – long, tangled dirty hair. A razor was a taboo to him. An Osu could not attend an assembly of the freeborn, and they, in turn, could not shelter under his roof. He could not take any of the four titles of the clan, and when he died he was buried by his kind in the Evil Forest. How could such a man be a follower of Christ? (Achebe 1959, p.156)

The issue of stereotyping is not new. With almost a uniform agreement among white Americans, African-Americans are labeled (in error), as lower class in mentality and manners. In a study conducted in the 1930s, Kimball Young listed many stereotypes for the “Negroes” in the United States. The study noted that African-Americans have “emotional instability, [are] lazy and boisterous” (Young, 1934, pp.158-163).

Why does the Diala avoid (or interacts less) with the Osu groups? When this author was younger, he was told many ‘funny and strange’ stories about the Osu group in his community similar to those documented in *Things Fall Apart*. There is a belief that people interact less or avoid the Osu because they feared that the spirit of the deities (which the Osu people serve), would haunt those who socialize with the Osu. The people in the villages believe that the deities that the Osu attends to are powerful and dangerous.

Others would say that socializing with the Osu would contaminate, pollute and transform the Diala into an Osu. There is also the belief that since the Osu has been dedicated to the gods it was a taboo to socialize with the group. In addition, oral history would say that the Osu is isolated because they “steal” and are “dishonest.” Yet, other stories would say that the Diala abhor those branded Osu because they are “dirty” or that they have “repulsive body odor” and are “lazy.” However, there is no empirical evidence to support these inhumane assertions (Dike 2002).

While some of the leaders of thoughts, the elite and politicians in Igboland pretend not to know about this social injustice, many reasonable and enlightened individuals in Igboland believe that the Osu caste system is a pure “politics of unreason” at its highest level (Lipset & Raab 1970). This discriminatory behavior is an added burden on the Osu who are already burdened with unemployment, poverty, crime and other injustices prevalent in Nigeria. And through socialization (and bias inherited from their parents) some of the Igbo youth have internalized the discriminatory behavior toward the Osu.

## **Culture and Social Progress**

The Osu system is “a cultural albatross for the Igbo society,” as it is an impediment to human relationships and social progress (Nwosu, June 19, 1999). The Osu caste system, which the forefathers of the Igbos invented, has become the culture in parts of Igboland. Sociologists have noted that the culture of a people influences their lives. And Igbo culture (as one can see), has influenced the practice and propagation of the Osu caste system.

Without a doubt, "Culture Matters" (Harrison and Huntington (eds.) 2000). The culture of a people, therefore, is an important variable in their social progress. Thus, a society's heritage, values, and customs, in large part, determine its social progress. If discrimination and segregation are inimical to social progress, then no society should preserve that aspect of its culture, which hinders its progress.

If one may ask, are the shrines that were inherited from the ancestors to blame for the continued practice of the Osu caste system in Igboland? Is the caste system compatible with the principles of democracy? Are the civil and human rights of the Osu groups not being violated? Is the Osu caste system in agreement with the Igbos' belief that one is his or her brother's keeper? One cannot ask enough questions here!

Obviously the Osu culture violates the civil and human rights of the people subjected to it. It is also against the principles of democracy, as it encourages segregation and inhibits the free association of the Osu with the Diala in Igbo society. At a period when the world is evolving into a global community, there is no room for this type of hate and bigotry. Preaching democracy by word of mouth is not enough. It has to be followed with actions. The discriminatory treatment of this group by the Diala runs contrary to how Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* portrays the Igbo culture. Okonkwo visited Nwakibie "to pay his respects and also to ask for a favor" with two pots of palm wine. During the presentation of colanut and offering of libation Nwakibie intoned:

We shall all live. We pray for life, children, a good harvest and happiness. You will have what is good for you and I will have what is good for me. Let the kite perch and the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break. (Achebe, 1959, p.19)

Thus, any person (or group) who discriminates against any human being (or group), does not wish that person (or group) well. In fact, if it were within the power of the ardent believers of the Osu system to decide who would go to heaven. The untouchables (as the Osu is often referred to), because of their social status, would not be allowed any place in heaven. Fortunately, these heartless and overly mean-spirited individuals do not have the power to play God. The Osu system and other forms of discrimination should not occur in any modern society. Nigeria should begin to educate her population on the importance of respecting the human and civil rights of their fellow human beings. Although the Osu caste system is not a Pan-Igbo issue, the effects on the people subjected to it is as discouraging and humiliating as the effects of the racial discrimination in the United States, or apartheid policy in South Africa before 1994.

### **Global Perspective on Discrimination**

Hatred and distrust between and among groups is not new. The Blacks in the United States suffer terrible discrimination in the hands of whites. As an example, the banks in the United States are much more reluctant to give loans/grants to blacks than to whites (The Economist, July 10th 1993). In Apartheid South Africa, blacks (before the system was dismantled in 1994), suffered similar discrimination in the hands of the whites. Like the racial discrimination in the United States, the Osu caste system promotes an ideology of the supremacy of the Diala over the Osu. Because racial discrimination occurs mostly between people of different skin colors (e.g. black and white) or between people from different nationalities, it is very difficult to understand the Osu phenomenon in the social history of the Igbos (a people of the same ethnicity).

The modern world views the ownership of human beings by other human beings, and the use of human beings for sacrifice as evil. Sadly, this was one of the characteristics of the Osu caste system in Igboland. As mentioned earlier, several Osu slaves were buried as a ritual to bury and mourn for deceased rulers, including the ruler of Igbo Ukwu. And this practice expanded during the years of slave trade (Isichei 1976).

Although the Osu people are not physically being slaughtered presently for rituals, but the Osu social stigma is a tremendous barrier to human relations and their upward mobility in some Igbo communities (see Chapter 2).

The sad fact remains that the domination and control of human beings by others has been a common practice in societies around the world; and this has been powered by prejudice and discrimination. For instance, slavery was an integral part of the ancient Greek society, and Plato was known to have opposed the enslavement of Greeks. Slaves were used for many tedious domestic chores in ancient Rome before the 2nd Century BC. But most of the slaves were foreigners and prisoners-of-war (Adkins and Adkins, 1994).

Unlike the Osu caste system in Igboland the slaves did not remain slaves from cradle to grave. And this practice of human enslavement did not go unchallenged. Three great slave revolts took place during this period. Two revolts occurred in Sicily in 135-132 BC and 104-101 BC; and the other took place in Italy around 73-71 BC (Adkins & Adkins, 1994; Madden, 1996). However, those slaves became free by being given manumission (freedom) by their owner, or by buying their own freedom. And any children subsequently born to them became free citizens (Adkins & Adkins 1994; Madden, 1996).

As noted earlier, in the Apartheid South Africa racial segregation was the law of the land before 1994. In South Africa, the English are against the Afrikaner. Both are against the Jews; and all the three are opposed to the Indians. But all the four conspire against the native black South Africans (Allport 1979). But the apartheid system was destroyed with the combination of internal forces and pressure from multinational corporations and foreign countries. Some of the readers may recall that the election of Nelson Mandela as the first black president of the country apparently brought a closure to the inhuman system.

The Igbos of Nigeria were among the many nations that opposed the repressive system of Apartheid in South Africa. Although the Osu caste system in Igboland may not be perceived as a national issue, Nigeria and in fact, the Igbos who were against Apartheid in South Africa should have destroyed its own internal apartheid before asking South Africa to do the same. Unfortunately, at the turn of the 21st Century, the Osu caste system is still in existence in many Igbo communities. This system is as repressive, if not more repressive, than the apartheid system in South Africa. As it was in the apartheid system an Osu, in most part, is segregated from the rest of the community; they are more or less like a socially imprisoned people in the Igbo community.

Racial discrimination was prominent in the Southern part of the United States before the American Civil War (1860-1865). The so-called Jim Crow laws enforced segregation with separate public drinking fountains for blacks and whites. Other minorities, Hispanics, Vietnamese, Native Americans were (and are still) being treated with disregard in the United States (Smelser 1981). Federal and State laws by the end of the sixties prohibit discrimination in all places. And the laws weigh heavily on any person or organization found guilty of this offense. Despite all the laws against discrimination in the society, covert racial discrimination is still alive and well in the United States. There remain discriminations in employment, housing, and in marriage.

This author has been subjected to discrimination in many instances in the United States. In one painful and frustrating instance, he was intentionally negatively appraised, and disparately treated on the job. Why? This is simply because he is a black person. Having experienced discrimination in the United States, this author could not avoid speaking against discrimination in Igboland. The ability of a black person in the United States to perform a simple task is always in question by the racist white man, even after he or she has proved himself capable of performing the task beyond all

reasonable doubt. As one writer rightly noted, in the year 2000, race in America still has a powerful impact on life experiences. Race affects mortality rates of black babies, the quality of education of black children where blacks live, how they interact with the police, the kind of employment opportunities or health care available to them – in short, life experiences from cradle to grave (Shaw, Feb. 25, 2000, p. A72).

Unlike the Osu caste practice in Igboland, racial discrimination in the United States is now chiefly practiced in covert and indirect ways. Because of all the laws in the society discrimination is no longer primarily a face-to-face encounter where embarrassment would result. And with the laws the victims of racial discrimination have some legal recourse. This is not to idealize the United States on race matters. White Americans are still very much better off; and they dominate political power. In other words, race still affects all facets of a black person's life in the United States.

The common ill treatment of blacks, both the poor as well as the affluent could be seen in attitudes. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK), the Skin Heads and White Supremacy, are among the reminders of the hostility against minorities, and the dangers of discrimination and prejudice in the United States (Smelser 1981; Bettelheim & Janowitz, 1964).

Adolf Hitler's hatred for the Jews and the atrocities his followers committed at the Auschwitz concentration camp, are still fresh in memory. The heinous act is very difficult to understand. In this camp millions of men, women, and children, mostly of Jewish descent, were murdered. Between the summer of 1941 and the end of World War II in 1945, about two and a half million people perished at Auschwitz in gas chambers and ovens. This was a deliberate genocide, which represented what Adolf Hitler had called the final solution of the Jewish problem. Nothing other than prejudice and discrimination against the Jews led to the horrible and unpardonable homicide (Allport 1979; Smelser, 1981; Shirer 1960).

The ending of the East-West Cold War and the peace treaty signed between Israel, Egypt, and Jordan has not helped the matter in the Middle East. And despite the on-going peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, the Arab/ Muslim, and Israeli conflict continues to simmer in the Middle East. In other words, violence between Muslims and Christians is still on the rise.

The caste discrimination in India is another global problem. The original caste system in India, Varna, came about when the Aryan-speaking nomadic groups migrated from the north to India in about 1500 BC. In other words, the caste system, which has been part of the Hindu religion, is believed to be nearly 3000 years old. The caste is an indicator of social and economic disparity in India.<sup>10</sup> The Harijans (the unclean, the lowest of the low caste, outcast, or untouchables) were known to have performed the menial jobs in the society (Sarchet-Waller, 1996; Murthy, 1999). The Harijans and Chamars were formerly denied access to skilled jobs and landed property by virtue of their caste. In India religious sanctions are used to impose an assignment of social hierarchy, which is impossible to escape, except of course, by changing one's religion.

However, Mahatma Gandhi fought against the evils of the caste system until he was assassinated in 1948. In September 1932, he began the struggle to "bring about a silent revolution in the structure" of the Indian society. Gandhi lamented that untouchability was "crushing the very soul of Indian religion and society." He promised the poorest and most downtrodden of the India's poor- the untouchables- that democracy would free them from their misery. Gandhi continued to fight to "eradicate the [caste] practice he found so abhorrent" until his death in 1948 (Jesudasam 1984).

The strongest and most frontal attack on the caste system in India was the Constitution of India adopted on Nov. 26, 1949. It is perhaps appropriate to mention that India became an independent nation in 1947. The 1949 "constitution guarantees the right of all its citizens to justice, liberty, equality, and dignity" (Murthy 1999). India has since

been working assiduously to bridge the country's bitter political divides. Although prejudice still exists in the villages, currently, India's outcast hold high paying jobs, and in the cities they can marry from other groups. The question is, can Nigeria's democracy free the Osu in Igboland as democracy has improved the life of the lower caste in India? This is an ultimate challenge for the Nigerian democracy.

In Guyana, a color-caste system has produced a racially divided labor market. The Africans (blacks) are said to dominate the civil service, the professional positions, and industry; and Indians are known to control agriculture and small businesses (Premdas, Autumn/Winter 1995). In the Indian Andes in South America, linguistic and cultural characteristics provide the basis for discrimination; the Indio, like virtually everyone else in the region, is of mixed ancestry. But the Indio is distinguished from others and 'kept in his place' by his mode of dressing, his habits, etc.

In Yugoslavia, the 1999 conflict between the Kosovars (the Moslem ethnic Albanians) and the Serbian military and para-military forces had ethnic and religious coloration. The Kosovars demanded political autonomy from Yugoslavia, but President Slobodan Milosevic (with his military might) was determined to crush the people and their demand. However, the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) did not allow the ethnic cleansing to go unpunished. The Serbs were bombed to submission. But Slobodan Milosevic did not go down, until the people's October 2000 revolution forced him out of office. Mr. Slobodan Milosevic who has since been arrested and indicted on war crimes charges, will be tried by the International Criminal Tribunal at The Hague (CNN: World, June 29, 2001).

The massacre of the Chechens by Russia is another reminder of the prevalence of prejudice and discrimination all over the globe. It is beyond human comprehension why the world has turned a deaf ear to this unjust extermination of a group by Russia. This is not an exhaustive list of nations in the world where discrimination and prejudice has caused untold misery. The list of injustice around the globe can go on forever.

### **The Social Implications of the Osu caste system**

The Osu caste system has many social implications. For the purpose of this work, we have classified them as human, civil and political implications. Beginning with human implications, the discussion follows below:

#### **1). Human Rights Implications**

One of the essential premises of this paper is campaign for justice and freedom for every human being. In addition, the aim of this paper is to change the mentality of those who support the Osu caste system in Igboland. Many of the Osu groups in Igboland have not seen true justice because of their social status. A priori, this has created debilitating psychic pain in the group. Due to paucity of statistics in Nigeria there is no data to ascertain the level of damage this system has caused on the population. It would be appropriate for some research to be carried out in this area.

The story of the human race, from age to age, is full of the struggle to enjoy certain fundamental rights. These rights include freedom from inhuman treatment; freedom from slavery; freedom from discrimination, freedom of thought, assembly and association and other rights that are "reasonably justifiable in a democratic society" (Azikiwe 1965, p.455). Thus, any culture or tradition that abridges people's freedom of association violates their human and civil rights. The discriminatory Osu caste system in Igboland is an example of such tradition and culture that bridges the people's rights to free association. This is an insult to the human race. And it is disheartening, to say the least.

Since human rights constitute the very foundations of democracy, how can democracy thrive in Igboland (and in Nigeria in general) with the discriminatory Osu caste system in the society? Everyone should have the freedom to pursue happiness, as liberty is a basic human right. Obviously, nobody can pursue happiness without being free. Those people branded Osu should have as much equal rights to liberty, life, and freedom as the Diala. These rights are what drive social struggles throughout the history of mankind.

When a group is enslaved, there is no freedom for them. And where there is no freedom, there is obviously no democracy for the Osu group. Sadly, in Nigeria the concept of democracy the public knows is political – sharing of resources among individual states, looting of the treasury by the political leaders with ethnic and religious pandering. Human and civil rights are issues that are not very relevant to the politicians running the affairs of the society. It seems that the leaders of Nigeria do not consider the ill treatment of the Osu as a human right violation.

In an article in the Punch newspaper of January 10, 1996, Mr. Kupoluyi reported how a young university graduate who was performing his national youth-service duties in Imo State (one of the 36 states in Nigeria), was discouraged from dating a beautiful young lady who caught his attention. The young man who was excited about his new found lover broke the news to one of his close friends who happened to know the social background of the woman. The young man, who was not an Igbo, had expected his friend to be excited for him. Instead his friend started to lecture him on the Osu culture in Igboland. He was warned that the Diala in the community would think he was Osu if he was seen in the company of the woman, as the woman in question was a member of the Osu of the community. The young man could not comprehend the culture. But his friend pressed on with stories of the social stigma of the Osu, and how other women of Diala extraction in the area would not associate with him because of the women. His friend pointed out to him the sections of the community where the Osu is living (the system encourages segregation and hinders social interaction). As this young man did not want to limit his chances of dating other girls in the area, he caved to social pressure and abandoned the girl. Obviously, the young lady discovered that her social background had been exposed to her prospective lover when the man started to distance himself from her (Punch Jan 10, 1996). The article (and similar stories) rekindled the ill feelings this author has had for this repugnant and inhumane Osu caste culture.

A NewsWatch investigation in Oruku community in Nkanu East Local Government Area of Enugu State further demonstrated how diminutive and discriminatory the Osu practice is. The people of Umuode in the Oruku community are regarded as Osu descendants by the villages of Umuchiani and Onuogowo (the two other villages that make up Oruku town). The people of Umuode are not allowed to mingle with the freeborn (Diala); they cannot inter-marry, and they are not allowed to buy or sell in the same local market. This is purely a primitive behavior. In Akwa-Ekiti in Anambra State, the Osu and the Diala (like in many other Igboland communities) live in different parts of the community (Agbaegbu, January 12, 2000). Unfortunately, every-body in the designated Osu community is automatically pariah, irrespective of ones beauty, level of education, or wealth. They are regarded as the lowest species of mankind, and are treated with contempt.

In a society such as Nigeria where there are no enforceable laws to protect the human rights of the people, an Osu person is often exposed to public ridicule. As you read this article many people are being unfairly treated on the basis of the Osu caste system. Even if they are not insulted and ridiculed in public, the “Osus” always have on them the dehumanizing Osu caste stigma.

The crusade guaranteeing human rights and fundamental freedom of people has been on for centuries. Thomas Jefferson's assertion in the Declaration of Independence (United States) is a good example. In the document, he asserted, in part:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness... (The Encyclopedia Americana, 1999, pp.552d-552h).

And since 1948 numerous international Human Rights Treaties have been negotiated that really define human rights. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), are among the many treaties. However, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the UN Commission on Human Rights prepared (then Chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt), and the UN General Assembly endorsed on Dec. 10, 1948, stands as the cornerstone document of human rights. This date is now widely commemorated as Human Rights Day. Regional agreements on human rights have also been drafted. The African Charter of Human and People's Rights signed in 1981 (and put in force in 1986), has been reported as the weakest of the regional human rights efforts. For instance, most of the provisions are not enforced, as regulatory institutions in the countries of Africa are either weak or non-existent. And law enforcement officers and the courts are tainted by corruption. This is apparently some of the reasons human rights violations are relatively high in this part of the world (The Encyclopedia Americana, 1999).

Clearly, the international and regional human rights documents show that human rights and freedom are to be enjoyed by all without distinction. Nobody should be denied the rights based on race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinions, and national or social origin, property or birth. The system is one of the human rights crimes without parallel in the modern world. But the world is not conscious of it. The social taboos placed on the Osu have prevented them from developing expectations of equality and freedom of choice, as the society has accepted the Osu caste culture as a norm. There is no rational explanation for the continued existence of the system, which has broad human and civil rights implications.

## **2). Civil Rights Implications**

Highlighting inequality in human treatment and relationships is the main objective of this book. Normally when people speak of civil rights, they mean those enforceable rights or privileges, such as freedom of speech, press, assembly, the right to vote, freedom of association, among others. Civil rights include all rights, which human beings have received from nature that the government (or another human being) cannot arbitrarily take away from them. And unless deprived by a guilty sentence or death, every person should enjoy these civil rights. Furthermore, civil rights are sometimes used to mean nonpolitical rights granted by law, such as basic economic and social rights.

One enjoys civil rights without hindrance if a law confers upon the person 'a positive power to do something.' Thus, civil rights are considered the cornerstone of a free society; they indicate ways in which a society protects individual freedoms. Civil rights also involve the rights to social justice and freedom; they also involve the rights to social justice, and freedom of association with other individuals. Freedom to believe in error and do evil by imposing a system of inequality among a people is not true freedom. This is the crux of the matter with the Osu caste system in Igboland.

The question is how can any rational human being justify the Osu caste system at this period of modern civilization? As a civilized people, the Igbos should note that democracy demands that the human personality in its course of development should be

allowed to proceed without artificial forces or barricade so long as its activity does not violate the safety and reasonable rights of others (The Encyclopedia Americana, 1999). It should also be noted that the struggle for social development should not be limited to the accumulation of material things, such as cars, cash, televisions, stereos, the computers and information super highways.

It is equally important to know that the social development of a nation (or a community) must include, among other things, justice, fairness, and equal treatment for its citizenry. In this way, the nation (or community) will achieve, at least for a long time to come, a desirable "unity in diversity" (Allport, 1979, p. 518). Any civilized society which is by "affirmation democratic" is expected to "provide and protect..." the civil rights of its citizens (Smith & Lindeman, 1951, p.19). And any person who violates a person's civil rights should be given due consequences without fear, or favor, ill will or affection.

Could the citizens of Nigeria learn to seek their own welfare and growth, not at the expense of their fellow men and women, but in concert with them?

The younger generation is less stereotype-ridden of the ascribed Osu than their parents, yet social interaction between the Osu and Diala has not really normalized. If the younger generation is perpetuating the wrongs committed by their forebears, they are then responsible for those wrongs. The youths that as the leaders of tomorrow should lead in condemning the Osu practice, which is a civil rights aberration.

Currently, the Igbo community does not have any collective solution to the Osu caste problem. Communities are dealing with the problem as it affects their localities. Nnobi community is a good example. This author would like to see a general Igbo solution to the Osu problem, instead of leaving it to individual communities. The Igbo society should not let discriminatory Osu caste system to continue, as the subjection of a part of the Igbo community to perpetual social misery and degradation is an unjustifiable human behavior.

### **3). Political Implications**

The Osu caste system is politically unpalatable in some Igbo communities. Those who adore the system often express some traditional sentiments in support of the preservation of this primitive heritage and custom whenever the issue is mentioned. Some of them would argue that the present Igbo generation does not have the authority to destroy what their forefathers invented. They would regard as insane any person who suggests the jettisoning of the Osu caste system.

Like ethnicity in Nigeria the Osu caste system influences the people's voting behavior in Igboland. Community development projects could be abandoned because a project is sited in an Osu area. The community of Ifakala in Mbaitolu local government area of Imo State had no good source of water supply. And the nearest stream in the area is about eight kilometers away. The State government under the leadership of Governor Sam Mbakwe in the 1980's decided to help the community with a pipe-borne water scheme. Strangely, a few days before the taps would begin to run, rumors circulated that the village in which the project was located was an Osu neighborhood, and therefore the water was deemed by the Diala as unfit for human consumption.

Consequently, the project was left to die away (Agbaegbu, Jan 12, 2000).

Some people in Igboland might even vote against any politician who condemns, or suggests the jettisoning of this Osu caste system. And some Igbo community would not elect a politician from the Osu group to represent them, even if such a person is a better candidate than the Diala. This behavior is more pronounced at the local (village) level. This undeniably prevents the ascribed Osu people from contributing as they ordinarily would to the sociopolitical and economic development of their communities.



The avid supporters of the system would not give their political support to Osu persons who are seeking public offices. Even those in office could lose their positions should they protest any ill treatment against the Osu group. Many examples abound, but the one that caught the attention of this author is the case of Mr. Morris Ede, a former commissioner for special duties in Enugu State. Mr. Ede, an Umuode indigene, protested the manner in which Governor Nnamani of Enugu State and his associates were handling the Osu crisis in Oruku community. The people of Umuode were driven out of their community, because they are said to be Osu. Apparently, because of his protest, Mr. Ede lost his job as a commissioner for special duties when Governor Nnamani reshuffled his cabinet. 11

The Osu situation is similar to what happened to the blacks in the United States in the 1960s. Some people are now advocating that America should pay restitution and render apology for the violation of the civil and human rights of the Black Race. The international community has also been called upon to recognize that there is a unique and unprecedented moral debt owed to Africans for their humiliation and exploitation (Robinson, 2000). By the same token, the entire Igbo community should eradicate the Osu system and render an apology, if not restitution, to the ascribed Osu people for their years of humiliation in the hands of the Diala. Thus, human beings should try to differentiate right from wrong, what is permissible and what is impermissible. The discriminatory Osu culture (like other types of discrimination) should be brought to the attention of the world. It is the hope of this author that this paper serves the purpose, as the Osu caste system is a human and civil rights tragedy.

### **The Osu Caste System: An Agenda for Change**

The crucial step of trying to find solution to the Osu issue in Igboland should start with the society recognizing that the problem exists and then muster the will to tackle it. If the society fails to see the problem, then it cannot confront it. And without effecting some positive changes in the mentality of those who are in support of the system, no 'sermon on the mount' or institutional sledgehammer would solve this longstanding social problem in Igboland.

This author believes that the Igbos can move away from this primitive aspect of their good culture, if they have the resolve to deal with the problem. The agenda for change proposed here reflects a serious assessment of the Osu caste challenge in Nigeria's social progress. This author recommends the following seven requirements that would enable Nigeria, and the Igbos in particular, to progress in the 21st Century. They are, in addition to legislative mandates, education of the masses, mass media campaigns, involvement of religious institutions, genuine contact and dialogue, individual therapy, and enforcement of the law.

### **Education**

One of the steps towards eradicating the Osu caste problem is education. The main purpose of education is to remedy ignorance. Education will involve a transformation of the citizenry, and making them aware of their rights and duties in the society. They should understand their own rights and the rights of other citizens, so as to recognize when their rights and those of the others are violated. They should also be educated on how to operate and behave in a democracy. The majority of those who support the Osu system reside in the villages. Since the village remains the bastion of strong habits regarding the Osu, the campaign must start there. They should be the main targets of

this enlightenment campaign, which if properly done, would help to eradicate prejudice and discrimination in the society.

If you educate the people, you create awareness, reduce ignorance, and in turn increase social interaction. The same is true of improved legislation, active participation of the mass media, religious organizations and social dialogue (see below for details). The Osu caste system has its roots in attitudes and behaviors that are widely shared among some of the people in Igboland. It is true that old habits are hard to break. But there is need for the campaign to be consistent and continuous.

Respect for people's rights begins from the institutions that an individual is exposed to during the person's formative years (the home, school, church, etc). Planting the right ideas in the minds of the youths would help to destroy the stereotypes that surround the Osu. In other words, it would help them to develop friendly attitudes towards this group. The more educated the society is, the easier and quicker it would be to find solutions to this social cankerworm. However, the teachers should not be left alone to perform this important task of educating the youths.

The government (federal, state and local) should also take part in this crusade. It should create an enabling environment (good policies and implementations) which would empower the oppressed and enhance their ability to legally challenge the ancient Osu caste tradition. With appropriate legislation and good court systems, the people could seek redress in court if their rights are violated. People have the choice to cry out for solutions to the teething social problems, or remain as they have been. Life is full of making choices and differentiating among optional actions, precisely on value grounds. Thomas Aquinas succinctly states that "we see life in terms of ought and ought not" and aims to "do good and avoid evil" (Quade, April 22, 1998).

## **Legislation**

Another step to eradicating the Osu culture in Igboland is through appropriate legislation. The legislators are elected to make laws for the benefit of all in the society. And the elected officials at the federal, state and local levels have important role to play in the form of enacting appropriate and enforceable laws to protect those facing discrimination in the society. There is a considerable difference between a law on the book and a law in action; any law is dead if it is not implemented.

Review of the Nigerian political history shows that in the mid-50s, the then Eastern Nigerian Colonial Legislative Council under the leadership of the late Owelle of Onitsha, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, passed a legislation that outlawed the Osu caste system. The law made it a criminal offense to discriminate against anyone on the basis of the Osu caste system. But the law, like other laws in Nigeria, was rendered impotent, as it was not enforced (Osu Cult - National Archive, Enugu [1935-1955]; also Nwosu, June 19, 1999). But that was in the 1950's. Although Nigeria faces many problems today, the country is now more advanced than the Nigeria of the 1950s. The law was not enforced, apparently for many reasons:

- i). The society was not then very conscious of human rights issues, as the society was still battling with colonialism and its hangovers;
- ii). The enforcers could see the law as going contrary to Igbo culture (in some areas - as in Igboland - the culture/public pressure could be strong enough to restrain the officials from implementing the law); and
- iii). Partly because those who are discriminated against could not complain to the authorities; this is because, sometimes it is easier to walk away when you are being discriminated against.

However, that the law was unenforceable then does not mean that better legislated and enforceable laws against the Osu system would not be effective in this 21st century.

This author would recommend that

States from the former Eastern Region should re-visit the Osu caste law crafted in the 1950's and make it enforceable. Alternatively the present National Assembly should adopt bills that would outlaw any form of discrimination in Nigeria, and in particular the Osu caste system in Igboland. The bills should include penalties for violation. For instance, any person who discriminates against any other person based on the Osu caste issue should pay a fine and serve a jail term, as may be prescribed by the people. Strict and enforceable penalties could deter violators of the law. And the nation should work harder to re-establish her ethical, moral capacity, and credibility by opposing bad policies. Without good policies the society would not progress.

Those who have concluded that an enforceable legislation would not help in solving the Osu problem should be informed that the trend toward de-segregation of schools in the United States in the past three or four decades had required a "long array of constitutional decisions" (Allport 1979). Therefore, legal prods are necessary to solve the Osu caste issue in Igboland. And the time is now.

### **The Mass Media**

Curiously, the mass media seems willing to overlook this difficult, but controversial Osu issue. But for anything to be possible in this campaign against the system, the mass media has an important and active role to play. It could do it in the form of disseminating appropriate information to the public. The mass media should lead the grassroots enlightenment campaign against the Osu practice in the society and educate the people on how to obey the laws of the land. They should educate both the victims – the ascribed Osu and the oppressor – the Diala, of their civil and human rights and what they should do when their rights are violated (for example, seeking legal redress). The society, which has long been under the claws of the military, has a long way to go in learning how to respect the civil and human rights of the people, and to obey the rule of law. It is the responsibility of the mass media to report cases of human rights abuses to the appropriate quarters for necessary investigations and prosecution. This would help to promote and protect the civil and human rights of the citizenry.

### **Religion**

The role of religion in every society is paradoxical. It makes and unmakes prejudice and discrimination. This is evident in the recent religious problems in Nigeria (the Shariah crisis in northern Nigeria). Many political leaders, commentators, scholars, and the general public are now viewing religious elements in public discourse as a tool to divide society. But any effort to banish religion in public affairs for politics sake would lead the nation astray because religious education could help the society in many ways. Religion matters to people and it matters a lot.

A truly religious faithful is a good individual. Religious teaching can make a difference on how to tackle the Osu system, as religion could have some influence on people's behavior. It can change the mentality of the people and the way they perceive the Osu system. The question is, if individuals seek God's blessing in their undertaking why would they wish others evil? As noted earlier, if you hate and discriminate against any person, you are definitely not wishing the person well.

Thus, the good morality of yesteryears is gradually eroding. The love for one another should be the moral foundation on which to build the nation. Religious organizations could affect some positive changes in the people if they are consistent in the campaign for the re-education of the Nigerian population. They used to be very important moral forces in human affairs. Presently, the moral messages from religious institutions have been less forceful than what they used to be. The churches should begin again to teach the youths that hate and discrimination are wrong. They should condemn the Osu caste system in Igboland without reservation.

### **Contact and Dialogue**

Social contact and dialogue, which will develop once the social re-education has been made, can make a lot of difference. The society should work together to ensure that the recommendations listed here are implemented. Does any person who is not a member of the Osu group have knowledge of the pain and agony the ascribed Osu group go through daily? Some people would admit to holding a variety of unpleasant Osu stereotypes: that the Osu is dishonest, dirty, has body odor, lazy, aggressive, etc. How then can one destroy these stereotypes without interacting with them? Most of the stereotypes held by the Diala are due to loss of contact with this rejected Osu group. For this, social contacts are good steps to erasing the ugly stereotypes. Social programs that encourage contacts with rejected groups are necessary to eradicate the prevailing stereotypes about them.

Contacts and acquaintances make for friendliness. When people dismantle the social barriers to relationship and find out that they have everything in common, discrimination would disappear. The government (federal, state, and local) should sponsor programs that would encourage interaction and understanding among groups. Communication could help to break up barriers with groups that are quarantined and socially imprisoned. Dialogue between the Diala and those wrongly branded Osu (second class citizens or sub-human beings) could help in understanding one another better. Kweisi Mfume pointed out in an interview with Claudia Dreifus (Mar-Apr, 2000), that, when you understand more, you are more sensitive; when you are more sensitive, you are more compassionate. When you are more compassionate, you are more prepared to see the other side of the issue (pp.51-63). Obviously, people cannot understand each other unless they interact with one another amicably.

### **Individual Therapy**

Those who have problems respecting the civil and human rights of their fellow human beings should consider seeking some individual therapy. Individual therapy is said to be foreign in Africa, apparently because Africans do not want strangers to know their personal problems. The government should set up counseling centers where those who could not afford private therapy should go for some mental re-adjustment and get some education on the importance of respecting other people's human and civil rights. They should be informed that the Osu caste system is a form of discrimination. The counseling centers could be operated by religious organizations.

The preaching and counseling in the centers could help to change the mentality and attitude of the ignorant and illiterate population who are propagating the Osu caste system. This idea may look impracticable from the surface. But a closer look would show that the minds of the die-hards and those who are sitting on the fence could be

altered through education and therapy, before they could appreciate the havoc their negative belief and the caste discrimination has caused those who are subjected to it.

### **The Court and the Law Enforcement**

The Nigerian judicial system, like every other system in parts of the society, is known to be corrupt. Consequently, corruption, crime, and human and civil rights violations continue with impunity. Government often appoints supposedly high-powered judicial commissions to probe notorious cases of public corruption or misconduct, but reports of such investigations will either not be made public, or a watered-down version of the report would be released “in the form of a government white paper” (Osoba 1996). Thus, many advertised steps for combating corruption in Nigeria are deceptive and symbolic.

The legal institutions should be restructured and equipped to handle corruption and discrimination cases, particularly those that involve the Osu caste issue. Above all, only people of probity should be allowed on the bench to enforce the laws of the land. No law in the book is useful if it is not implemented.

In conclusion, the golden rule should be, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The ancient, dehumanizing, anti-social, anti-democracy and superstitious Osu caste system in Igbo society should be discarded. And every God-fearing individual should join hands in this campaign. As Prof. Wole Soyinka rightly noted in *The Man Died* (1972), “the man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny.”

### **Notes and References**

1. The population of the Igbos is more than that of Norway, Switzerland, Denmark, Belgium, and Luxembourg combined (Igbo Studies Association (not dated): [www.igbostudies.com/information.htm](http://www.igbostudies.com/information.htm))
2. An oral history of how the Osu came to be in a community in Igboland, as was narrated by one of the persons interviewed by the author for this book.
3. Uzoma Onyemaechi; “Igbo Culture and Socialization,” collated essay (not dated); The University Of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
4. Nwosu, Okenwa R.; “Osu Caste System: A Cultural Albatross for the Igbo Society” Online publication: [www.nigeriaworld.com](http://www.nigeriaworld.com) (June 19, 1999). This article was a response to an article by this author published Online: “The Caste system in Nigeria, Democratization, and Culture: Sociopolitical and Civil Rights Implications;” [www.afbis.com/analysis/caste.htm](http://www.afbis.com/analysis/caste.htm) (June 13, 1999). In this article, Dr. Nwosu gave a brief description of how the caste system came to be in the Igboland. Information on the religious aspect of the caste appeared in his unpublished manuscript, “Religious Underpinning of the Osu Caste System” he made available to this author in July 2002. This author is very appreciative of this information.
5. See Victor Dike on “The Caste System in Nigeria, Democratization and Culture: Socio-political and Civil Rights Implications;” Online publication: [www.afbis.com](http://www.afbis.com), June 13, 1999. The term, Osuism, is a belief (like racism) that a group’s social position is the main determinant of how other groups in the society associates with the group. The term is modeled from ‘racism’ and ‘sexism’ (terms that concern race and gender), refer to discrimination based on what we take to be physical differences of one kind or another.

6. See Nwosu above. Also see his unpublished manuscript on the religious aspect of the caste system: "Religious Underpinning of the Osu Caste System." He made the information available to this author in July 2002. (This author is very appreciative of the information).

7. See Dike 1999; and Nwosu 1999 above.

8. See Dike 1999; and Nwosu 1999 above.

9. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), are among the many treaties. See the Encyclopedia American; International Edition (Grolier), Vol. 14, 1999, pp. 552d-552h. United Nations (1988): Action in the Field of Human Rights.

10. Ashwini Deshpande; "Does Caste still define disparity? A look at inequality in Kerala, India; (not dated). Deshpande is an Economist at the New Delhi School of Economics. I am grateful to her for sending me a copy of this article at my request. She presented this paper at the American Economic Association (AEA) while doing a postdoctoral work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The paper deals with the social and economic effects of the caste system in Kerala, India. The paper concludes that nearly fifty years after Indian Independence in 1947, the calculations with NSS data for 1993-94 shows that even in relatively egalitarian state like Kerala, inter caste disparity continues to underlie overall disparity.

11. See Tobs Agbaegbu's report on NewsWatch, January 12, 2000. The people of Umuode in Nkanu East local government area of Enugu State have suffered in the hands of the people of Umuchiani and Onuogowu (Umuode, Umuchiani and Onuogowu make up the Oruku town). They are regarded as the descendant of Osu, and therefore are being treated as second-class citizens. It is even difficult for the people of Umuode to be appointed into positions of responsibility in their local churches, and they do not inter-marry with the other two villages. The people of Umuode also operate their own local market different from the Eke-Oruku market, which is owned exclusively by Umuchiani and Onuogowu. To see how serious this issue is, any person from Umuchiani and Onuogowu who talks to or greets any person from Umuode pays a fine sometimes as high as N1000 (one Thousand Naira)

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